MARY SWORDS DEBAILLON

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LOUISIANA NATIVE IRISES

by

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INTRODUCTION

Iris, A Greek word meaning rainbow, is symbolic of the beautiful family of flowers. This name, so highly esteemed by the Greeks, was bestowed on their Goddess of rainbow or colors.

The "flag", or Iris, may be traced back to the old Biblical days. In the Book of Job, one of the three friends Bildad, the Shubite, asks, "Can the rush grow up without mire? Can the flag grow without water?"

Aside from the lovely bloom of the Iris, the root is used as a basis for perfumes and dentifrices and cordial flavors, sold under the name of orris root. This is a corrupt form of Iris root.

The Iris family may be placed in three general groups:

1. Horizontal rhizome - Examples - Louisiana native and bearded.
2. Fibrous rooted - Examples - Japanese, Siberian and Spuria.
3. Bulbous - Examples - Spanish, Dutch and English.

The Iris family (Iridaceae) is worldwide in distribution. There are 170 distinct species and countless varieties and strains.

DISTRIBUTION

Irises are widely distributed in the United States, but more numerous in the Gulf Coast area. The Iris as a genus is confined to the Northern Hemisphere and completely encircles the globe from the edge of the Arctic region to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean, having moved South during the glacial period. Since their cork-covered seed is commonly water-borne, they came South on the flood waters of long ago.

The Louisiana native Irises are interesting and becoming more popular with the amateur collector and grower, both for their variety and beauty of flower. They bloom very early in the spring, before many other blooms appear in the garden. They are easy to grow and do not require very special care.

The flooded areas of Louisiana along its numerous streams have been blessed with the wide distribution of the floating native Iris seed.

"The Iris Center of the Universe" was the phrase coined by the late Dr. John K. Small, authority on plant life of the South, to describe the rich, wild Iris fields of South Louisiana. Dr. Small as curator of the New York Botanical Gardens was the first to describe these fields and to call attention to their magnitude, to the great variety of the flowers and to the unusual size of the plants.

Under best growing conditions in their wild state, flower stalks over six feet tall have been found. This fascinating and popular wild flower ranges in color from white through all the lavenders, blues, and purples to deepest violet. There are many shades of pink, rose, red, bronze, and there are a few yellows.

The area in Southeast Louisiana near Houma, Thibodaux and Morgan City, is a hotbed of rainbow colors of the natural hybrids. This is the melting pot resulting from natural crosses of the tall blue shades (Giganticaerulea) and brick red or bronze (Fulva). In these areas natural hybrids are found the rare shades of pink, rose, reds, violet and some yellows.

An Iris lover and collector with whom we have made field trips to look for rare hybrids, refers to a special wild Iris section in Southwest Louisiana as "Iris Haven". This area is a converging point of two old streams where the low blooming blues (Foliosa) the medium size brick red (Fulva), and the tall-blooming blues (Giganticaerulea) meet. The resulting natural hybrids are a mass of rainbow colors.

COLLECTING, TRANSPLANTING AND CULTIVATING

The native Iris may be moved most any time of the year. The best time to collect them in the wilds is during the blooming season. In digging the native Iris, be sure a good portion of the rhizome is left on the plant. Use a leaf stalk and not the flower stalk. Label if identity is to be kept. No special packing is necessary. In transplanting, do not place rhizome more than one inch deep. They are easily re-established in the garden. However, it is best to

move or transplant them in the late summer or early fall, after the year's food supply has been stored in the rhizomes. They are a moisture, shade and humus loving plant, so they should be planted in a well-prepared bed containing plenty of humus and watered thoroughly to get them established.

Although water is essential to their distribution and the establishment of young plants, it is not best that this plant be in water at all times. In their natural state, Iris plants are often found growing in shallow standing water for weeks or months, but at other seasons there is no standing water where they grow. During the growing season, a large amount of water is most beneficial.

It is an interesting fact that native Irises adapt themselves to ordinary garden conditions and can be grown successfully in Louisiana, if particular attention is given to watering. Usually the poorly drained area of the garden is the best place to grow Louisiana native Irises. It is suggested that drainage be obstructed on the area where they are grown so as to keep their feet wet during the rainy seasons.

A good plan is to plant them in a hole about six to eight inches deep and wide enough to accommodate one collection of plants. Individual holes for different lots will be helpful in keeping them separated. Plants will eventually run together in one bed if left alone. Plants should be spaced at least one foot apart and the direction of the rhizomes should be alternated.

Since organic material or humus under moist conditions tend to create an acid condition of the soil, it is well in preparing the area for wild Iris to first build up the humus content of the soil.

Unlike the bearded Iris that requires a sweet soil, the native Iris prefers a slightly acid soil. Most soils where native Irises grow under natural conditions are slightly acid. However, they will grow and do fairly well on neutral or even slightly alkaline soil. Under average conditions in preparing garden soils for Louisiana native Irises, it would be well to have a slightly acid rather than too alkaline a soil. This condition may be brought about by adding peat moss, leaf mold, other well-decomposed organic material or by use of aluminum sulfate, plus plenty of water.

FERTILIZATION

Like any other plant, Iris will respond well to fertilizer as well as to cultivation. Well-rotted barnyard manure should be applied around the rhizomes during January and early February. This treatment may be supplemented by an application of a commercial garden fertilizer (6-12-6) if large flowers are desired. Working the fertilizer into the soil by cultivating around the rhizomes will help. The rhizomes are shallow and care should be taken not to cut or disturb them while cultivating. Keep the Iris bed free of weeds and wait for the early spring surprises.

HYBRIDIZATION

Natural hybrids are plentiful in areas where different species or varieties are growing close together. This may occur in the wilds or in the home garden. Insects do the cross pollinating. The resulting hybrids produce interesting variations.

Artificial crosses are easily made after a little experience. Just before the flower bud opens on the seed or mother plant it may be forced open then the anthers or pollen sacks removed with a pair of tweezers. Then take pollen from the second parent plant just opening and place the pollen on the pistil of the mother plants.

This completes the operation except that the flower may be bagged to prevent insect visitation. However, the amateur may not wish to be that scientific. Then too, the bagging may not be so important. Seeds from a cross will produce interesting variations. Desired hybrids from the first cross may then be propagated by rhizomes.

GROWING PLANTS FROM SEED

Iris seed are slow germinating. It usually takes three to four years from seed to bloom. Seed pods are normally mature enough to harvest and plant by July and August. Germination has been hastened by harvesting the seed before they get too dry or fully matured and planting immediately at harvest time. Storing the seed in the ice box for a month to six weeks also helps to induce germination.

The seed should be planted in a seed flat containing half sand and half peat moss and well mixed. Cover the seed with about one inch of peat moss. Keep the seed bed damp but not soaked. Good drainage is necessary, and this may be accomplished by placing holes in the bottom of the seed flat and by placing a layer of small rocks in the bottom. When the new seedlings are up to eight or ten inches high they may be transplanted to permanent beds about one foot apart.

VARIETIES

Some of the more prevalent named varieties found in Louisiana that were identified by Dr. Small and illustrated by Miss Caroline Dorman, are the following: Fulva, Giganticcarulea, Foliosa and Virginica. There are hundreds, yes, maybe a thousand or more other varieties, hybrids and strains or what have you.

There is a need for some systematic work on classification and namenclature of Louisiana native Irises.

The State Highway Department has plans to develop native Iris planting in certain areas along our highways. This is to be commended since the native Iris is so distinctive in Louisiana. It is more characteristic of this State than any other flower. It is believed by many flower lovers that the native Iris should be made the State Flower of Louisiana.